

Philemon 1-25 ~ Friendship, Forgiveness, Reputation ~ Discussion Questions

1. Can this short letter be viewed from different perspectives? What might some of them be?
2. Could the common view of Onesimus as a runaway, thieving slave be wrong? What might be another view?
3. What does Paul mean by saying he is a prisoner of Christ Jesus? (v. 1) Would you go to prison for your faith in Christ or support someone who did?
4. If someone knew you only by reputation, say your Facebook page, would he be likely to say, "I've heard about your faith in Jesus." (vv. 4-7)
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9. Why would Martin Luther consider Verse 18 to be the central focus of the book and Harry Ironside say it is a picture of the entire gospel?
10. Harry Ironside closed his sermon on Philemon by quoting the words from a well-known hymn. What do you think it was?
11. What response from Philemon did Paul anticipate? (v. 21) How would you respond in a similar situation?
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13. Is there a broken relationship in your life that you could or should rectify? What can you do to start the process *this week*?

Philemon 1-25 ~ Friendship, Forgiveness, Reputation ~ Leader's Guide

1. Can this short letter be viewed from different perspectives?

I looked up some commentaries and sermons on Philemon and, in fact, found four quite different interpretations or messages depending upon whose shoes—or sandals—you saw yourself in and how you interpret the scripture. From the standpoint of *Philemon* the message is one of forgiving and loving others, no matter what they've done. *Onesimus*, the slave, is messed up, raised as a pagan but now a believer, he may owe some money to Philemon, and then Paul goes to bat for him. If you're in *Paul's* shoes, it means taking a messed up person under your wings and spending time and effort straightening him out, and even going so far as to assume his past debts. And from the standpoint of a *parable*, Paul takes Onesimus' debts on his back with Philemon just as Jesus took our sins on his back with God the Father.

2. Could the common view of Onesimus as a runaway, thieving slave be wrong? What might be another view?

The common interpretation of the scripture is that Onesimus is a runaway slave that has stolen some money from Philemon. That interpretation comes from just one verse two thirds of the way through the letter, Verse 18, where Paul says, "If he owes you anything, charge it to me." Unfortunately, that interpretation of Onesimus being a runaway, thieving slave colors everything else, but even more unfortunately, it's probably wrong.

Craig Wansink, a Biblical scholar, says in the Oxford Bible Commentary, "for a number of reasons, it seems unlikely that Onesimus either ran away or was alienated from his master. He says, First, it seems unreasonable to believe that Onesimus would run away from his master and somehow travel 1,000 miles by land and sea to go to Rome to find a friend of his master. Second, if Onesimus were estranged from Philemon and in need of reconciliation, his conversion to the Christian faith under such conditions could well appear feigned and opportunistic. Third, although Paul asks that Philemon support Onesimus and accept him back, he does not request pity or forgiveness on behalf of Onesimus. And also, Onesimus is not presented in any way as remorseful or repentant.

So it appears that Onesimus neither ran away nor was estranged from his master. Paul is writing from prison, thanking the recipients for their support. He sees them as fellow workers or partners. And when he returns a person who had been sent to help him in prison, he feels justified in asking that this person be received with respect and care. It's a similar situation as with the Philippian. They had sent Epaphroditus to minister to Paul's needs on their behalf for which Paul thanks them in his letter. Similarly, Onesimus appears to have been sent by Philemon to serve Paul in prison. But in this case something unique happened: Onesimus became a Christian and Paul had now found a new colleague in

ministry. So the fact that Onesimus was probably sent by Philemon to help Paul while he was in prison puts a little different slant on understanding the book. Most people seem to mainly focus on the restitution of Onesimus to Philemon, but there's a lot more to it than that.

3. What does Paul mean by saying he is a prisoner of Christ Jesus? (v. 1)

Would you go to prison for your faith in Christ or support someone who did?

In all his other letters, Paul refers to himself as either an apostle of Christ Jesus or a servant of Christ Jesus. This is the *only* time he says he is a *prisoner* of Christ Jesus. He's not really a prisoner of Christ, but because of Christ or for the sake of Christ. In the Amplified Bible, this verse reads, "Paul, a prisoner for the sake of Christ Jesus, and our brother Timothy, to Philemon our dearly beloved sharer with us in our work,"

If push came to shove, would you go to prison for your faith in Christ? In other words, would you be like Paul in this story? Or even like Philemon, would you stand up for someone who was being persecuted for his or her faith? Would you truly *share* in his work? Obviously, it's easier to say, "oh, yeah, I'd definitely stand up for someone who was being persecuted for their faith." But let me ask you, what happened to the 11 apostles who were with Jesus the night he was arrested? Or even Peter, the only one who did follow along to the high priest's house where he was questioned by Caiaphas? Fortunately, we're not often faced with these situations—if ever. But my take is that it's a lot easier being an intellectual Christian than a practicing Christian.

4. If someone knew you only by reputation, say your Facebook page, would he be likely to say, "I've heard about your faith in Jesus." (vv. 4-7)

Although this letter is addressed to the entire house-church, here Paul's words of thanks are directed to just Philemon. In verse 5, Paul says he's heard of Philemon's faith in the Lord Jesus and his love for all 'the saints,' meaning Christ followers. He then says he hopes Philemon will be active in sharing his faith'. From the NLT we read: "And I am praying that you will put into action the generosity that comes from your faith as you understand and experience all the good things we have in Christ." Now, bear in mind, Paul had never actually met Philemon face to face. Philemon lived in Collosae and Paul had never been there. Philemon may have heard Paul preach in Ephesus, but Paul only knows Philemon by reputation.

So to the question: if someone knew you only by reputation, say your Facebook page, would he be likely to say, "I've heard about your faith in Jesus. I hope you're sharing it with others and I hope you're learning from it and putting it into action." I met someone for the first time a couple of weeks ago at the pancake breakfast at the Little Red Schoolhouse in Washington Valley. He said, "oh, I've heard about you. You're the one with the HMMWV, aren't you?" I can't tell you

how much I wish he had said, “oh, I’ve heard of you. You’re the one who leads the Wednesday morning Bible study at the Famished Frog in Morristown, aren’t you?” But unfortunately, I’m much better known for what I’ve done in computers and philately and military vehicles and travel writing than I am for Biblical research or sharing my faith. It’s something I’m trying to remedy but it’s not something you achieve overnight or by a simple Facebook posting. Think about that. Jesus called us to be *active* in sharing our faith. He commanded us to *go*, *make* disciples of all nations, *feed* my sheep. He didn’t say, “give money to missionaries.”

A related problem is, as the expression goes, “you don’t have a second chance to make a first impression.” A friend introduced me to a high school senior a few months ago who wanted me to write a letter of recommendation for him to Cornell. I talked to him for about an hour but everything—the way he was dressed, how he described his extracurricular activities and summer job, and why he said he liked Cornell just screamed out to me, “sorry, but you shouldn’t be applying to an Ivy League school.” I worry about that when I meet someone for the first time—do they see me as a Christ follower? Do they like what they see and want to be a Christ follower because of who I am and what I say? How about with you? Do people see you as a Christ follower? Do they want to be like you?

5. In Verses 10-11, what did Paul say about Onesimus?

Paul notes that this slave was called Onesimus, meaning *useful* in Greek, but he was actually useless. But now that he has become a Christian, he *is* truly useful. “Both to you and to me,” Paul says.

Paul says, I’d like to keep him with me so that he might be of service to me in your place. In those days, when Paul was in prison or even under house arrest, he would have been dependent on outsiders for food, clothing, delivering letters, and so on. But then in verse 14 Paul goes on to say, I don’t want to do anything without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not forced.

6. Onesimus was “separated” from Philemon. Does that mean he ran away? (v. 15)

It is a mistake to interpret the word “separated” as meaning “ran away.” Slaves were often separated from their owners, conducting business for them, delivering letters, helping others, or simply working elsewhere where their labor was needed. But the important thing here is Paul’s suggestion to Philemon that maybe this separation was a good thing. Paul says, Onesimus is coming back, “no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear—or beloved—brother.” Notice that Paul refers to Philemon right in his opening in Verse 1 as a dear friend or a beloved friend and then in Verses 7 and 20, Paul refers to Philemon as his brother. And now what does he say about Onesimus? He says that he too is a dear or beloved

brother. So he's saying, we're all three of us equal—we're dear to each other, we're fellow workers, we're brothers. Why? Because we're Christians!

7. Can being separated from someone close to you ever be a good thing?

Let's look at it from another angle, from that of Philemon. It's hard to see that any good can come out of someone close to you being separated for a while. When my oldest daughter decided she wanted to go to college in Northfield, Minnesota, I was not at all happy. And a few years later when my second daughter decided she wanted to go to Zimbabwe for a year as an intern, I was even less happy. But both separations worked out well. My daughters came back more mature with experience that they could not possibly have gotten here in New Jersey. Over the years, I've gotten to where I encourage separations—certainly not for the sake of being separated— but where there is a potential benefit. Three years ago, I encouraged Betsy to go to Guatemala on a missions trip without me. She didn't want to but I would have just gotten back from two weeks in Africa and I just couldn't handle another trip. So she went and did some things she hadn't done before and since then has gone back five times on her own—and she is a terrific leader doing things she might not have done had I been along.

8. Are you willing to let go and be separated from those who are close to you? Can it benefit you? Can it benefit the other person? What about Onesimus? Do you look for and welcome opportunities to be separated?

Do you encourage your son or daughter or spouse to get out and go do things on their own? Helpful things. Not necessarily a missions trip, but something that will lead to maturity and Christian growth. Are you willing to really let go—at least for a little while?

What about Onesimus—the one who's being sent away? How do you think he felt being sent on a thousand-mile trip to find this prisoner in Rome and minister to him? Scared? Maybe a little like Jonah? Why me?

I remember my first job after I got out of the Army. I was an analyst in a very small market research firm—in fact I was employee number 6. I had been running analyses of sales patterns of various consumer paper products like toilet tissue, paper towels and a brand new product just introduced by Northern Products, paper diapers. Well, I had been with the company about three weeks and the owner and president had scheduled a presentation on Wednesday with our client, Scott Paper, to report on these new paper diapers. Tuesday morning I get a call from him. He's out in Minneapolis with General Mills talking about a new product introduction and he says to me, “this is huge for us and it's going to take another day or two. So, Dave, you go to Philadelphia and do the Scott presentation.” Moi? Are you kidding? Well, you don't say no to your new boss so I muddled through it somehow and within three months Scott was essentially my client. So after that short trip, I was much more valuable to my boss and to the company.

No, I was not a pagan that became a Christian, but since becoming a Christian, I've had a number of "separations"—to Promise Keepers in Boulder, Colorado, to Guatemala, to Jordan, and to Ghana where my faith was challenged and strengthened and I came back a much more "useful" Christian.

My question is: do you look for opportunities to strike out on your own? Do you welcome them? Especially opportunities to help others? Like Onesimus helped Paul? Like maybe helping people in Guatemala—or Mississippi—or maybe Morristown?

9. Why would Martin Luther consider Verse 18 to be the central focus of the book and Harry Ironside say it is a picture of the entire gospel?

Paul says in Verse 18, "If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me." The word *if* actually makes it hypothetical. Onesimus did not necessarily wrong Philemon. He may have owed him something because at this time, slavery often resulted from personal bankruptcy. So some people became slaves because they were in debt to their masters. Or because the slave owner had paid off their debt to someone else. Also, even if a slave didn't owe anything to his master, if the slave were freed, the owner would expect some compensation. So we see that this verse doesn't mean that Onesimus is a thief, but he may well owe something to Philemon.

However, interpreting the letter in the more traditional way, Martin Luther, along with many later commentators, consider this verse to be the central focus of the entire book. Luther wrote, "Here we see how Paul lays himself out for poor Onesimus, and with all his means pleads his cause with his master: and so sets himself as if he were Onesimus, and he himself had done wrong to Philemon. Even as Christ did for us with God the Father, so also Paul does for Onesimus with Philemon. We are all Christ's Onesimi, to my thinking."

Harry Ironside, the great evangelist of the 1920's and 30's considers his greatest sermon to be the one titled, "Charge that to my account" based on the book of Philemon. About Verse 18, he said, "Is not this a picture of the gospel? A picture of what Christ our Savior has done for every repentant soul? I think I see Him as he brings the needy, penitent sinner into the presence of God, and says, 'My Father, he has wronged Thee, he owes Thee much, but all has been charged to My account. Let him go free.'

Ironside adds another thought: he says, "But observe, it is not only that Paul offered to pay Onesimus' debt, but that he provided for his future, too. He says to Philemon: "If you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me." He says, isn't that another aspect of our salvation? Christ brings us into the presence of the Father, and says, "forgive his sins, receive him as me, and make him an heir, an honored member of the family. This, of course, is the real life parable in this book.

10. Harry Ironside closed his sermon on Philemon by quoting the words from a well-known hymn. What do you think it was?

Jesus paid it all,
All to Him I owe;
Sin had left a crimson stain:
He washed it white as snow.

11. What response from Philemon did Paul anticipate? (v. 21) How would you respond in a similar situation?

In verse 21 Paul says, “Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.” Some of you know my fabulous wife, Betsy. Well, her friend Judy (not her real name), a single mom who works full time, was having a birthday party for a friend and she asked Betsy if she’d make some cookies or brownies. So she made ‘em Friday night. On Saturday morning, Betsy is loading all of our folding chairs in her SUV and I say, “what are you doing?” She says, “I’m going over to Judy’s to help her set up and cook for the party.” Betsy’s always setting this kind of example for me. Her actions challenge me and sometimes, it’s painful.

So my question is, if Paul or someone came to you with a request for help, would you say, “Sure!” ...and look for ways that you can go beyond the request? Conversely, would Paul say, “I know you’ll not only do what I ask, but you’ll do even more—without my even having to ask?”

12. What are the main lessons for us today from this short book?

Let me pose them as questions. First, would you go to prison for your faith in Christ? Would you stand up for someone who was being persecuted for his or her faith?

Second, what is the reputation that goes ahead of you? Would you expect someone you barely knew or who met you for the first time to say to you, “I’ve heard of your faith in Jesus. I hope you’re sharing it with others. I hope you’re putting it into action and learning from it.”

Third, are you setting a good example? Would someone want to follow Christ because of what you say and do?

Fourth, are you willing to let go of those close to you? Do you encourage them to get out and do things on their own? Things that will help others and help them grow in Christ. Or on the other side, are you willing to take a risk, let go of the familiar, and strike out on your own to help people in need?

And lastly, when someone comes to you with a request for help, do you go beyond the request? Do you do more without having to be asked?

Follow-up:

Like many Bible stories, this one is open-ended. We aren't told what happened to Onesimus. Was he accepted back by Philemon? Did he stay with Paul? Or what? Actually, Paul mentions him in his letter to the Colossians (4:7-9) in which he says he is sending Tychius with Onesimus to the people of Colosse with news of what's happening with Paul in prison. This letter was most likely written in the year 60 about the same time as the letter to Philippians and shortly after the letter to Philemon.

The next time we hear anything is in 107 in a letter of Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, to the church at Ephesus. Ignatius was under arrest and on his way to Rome to be executed. In the opening (Ch 1), he has much to say about the "excellent" bishop of the church at Ephesus, who is none other than Onesimus. So clearly Paul's leading Onesimus to Christianity bore a great deal of fruit in the long run.

Ignatius Letter to the Ephesians, Chapter 1 — Praise of the Ephesians.

I have become acquainted with your greatly-desired name in God, which ye have acquired by the habit of righteousness, according to the faith and love in Christ Jesus our Saviour. Being the followers of the love of God towards man, and stirring up yourselves by the blood of Christ, you have perfectly accomplished the work which was beseeming to you. For, on hearing that I came bound from Syria for the sake of Christ, our common hope, trusting through your prayers to be permitted to fight with beasts at Rome, that so by martyrdom I may indeed become the disciple of Him "who gave Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God," [ye hastened to see me]. I have therefore received your whole multitude in the name of God, through Onesimus, a man of inexpressible love, and who is your bishop, whom I pray you by Jesus Christ to love, and that you would all seek to be like him. Blessed be God, who has granted unto you, who are yourselves so excellent, to obtain such an excellent bishop.

Prayer after Philemon Bible Study:

Lord, I ask you to give us the wisdom to understand the lessons from Paul's short letter to Philemon. Give us the courage to stand up for our faith in Christ no matter how uncomfortable it might be. Give us the strength to speak out about our faith so that people would say of us, "there's a Christ follower. I want to be like him." And, Lord, when you present us with an opportunity to get away from our safe familiar surroundings, we ask that we would see, seize it, and reach out to help others in need. And lastly Lord, we ask that it would just be built into us to go beyond someone's request for help, that we would recognize these situations, that we would leap on them, and stay with it as your representative, until the work is done. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.